

ALMOST MISS AMERICA

by

Alvin Boretz

"ALMOST MISS AMERICA"

Being beautiful had always worked for Lori. From the first beauty contest in which her aunt had entered her at the age of two, applause had told Lori that she was loved because she was beautiful. It remained that way through the early years and all the winning contests. When she was made prom queen in college, it was only one more affirmation of the "truth" that admiration of her beauty was acceptance of her as a person.

But the best was yet to come. Encouraged by friends, neighbors and of course, her ever doting aunt, who had raised her, Lori entered the Miss America contest and swept through all the elimination contests until she was crowned with the mantle of Miss Missouri and found herself in Atlantic City. It is here..where we begin our story.

It is an unreal world Lori has entered. Fifty beautiful young women beset by officials, chaperons, crowds and all the hangerson, each hoping to satisfy his or her need. Despite the overt friendliness of the contestants, there is a knife behind each smile for these young women have planned and worked and schemed for the climactic moment of being crowned Miss America. There is Miss Wisconsin who talks to her mirror each morning asking for a prophecy and Miss California who is

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trying to find out who the judges are so she can sleep with them and put in the fix. As for Lori, she is aglow with the excitement and quietly confident that the magic will stay with her. It always has and though she sees the determination of the other women and their machinations, she has the secret knowledge that soon it will all be hers.

On the big night, her confidence seems to be well founded as one by one, the girls are eliminated and it all comes down to the final five, then four then three...then two and as Lori braces for the announcement of Miss Missouri, she hears the name of the other girl announced. Lori has come in second. And behind the beautiful, brave smile, the tears are barely held back.

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The bloom fades before her eyes as the very next morning she has to vacate her hotel room. No way she can go home. How can she? Everyone was expecting her to win. But the real wound is the sense of rejection. What was wrong with her that she didn't win? Slowly she gathers herself. They were wrong and she's going to prove it. In her handbag is the card of a press agent who visited all the girls and gave them his card, suggesting that if they came to New York, he could help them with their careers.

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As Lori discovers, the press agent hands out his cards at each pageant hoping to catch a few fish. Invariably, he

does. Some sleep with him and some, like Lori, wriggle off the hook. He promises her work however, and in a way, he does deliver. She finds herself wearing swim suits at conventions and is crowned Miss Start Your Own Business at a trade show. She also is bestowed with the titles of Miss Pretzel Week and Miss Sausage Queen. One summer day she is taken to a summer resort where she is placed in an ice filled bathtub for a captioned picture of a former beauty queen cooling off. When she turns blue and complains, she is assured that the picture isn't in color. Despite all the indignities and exploitation, Lori stays with the belief that she will somehow make it. The loss in the Miss America contest was just a fluke. She can never admit to anyone that her beauty is her lifeline and that it is the only way she can be loved.

Advised to become a model she appears at an agency where the older models see her as just one visible sign of their own aging. A few of the girls are friendly to her and one, who was a former Miss America contestant, invites her to share her apartment. It is through this girl that Lori sees more of what lies ahead. One of the reasons the apartment is so filled with furniture is that a current boyfriend is in the furniture business. Lori is also awakened in the middle of the night as the girlfriend, unable to sleep, compulsively calls people to ward off her fear and loneliness. Lori moves

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out when she comes home one afternoon and finds her room mate turning tricks.

A relationship begins with a photographer who likes her and offers to do a set of pictures for very little money. It is here that she meets Paul, a young advertising executive. She is attracted to him but he seems cold to her. Later, she discovers the reason when the photographer turns out to be a pornographer who asks her to pose for some nude shots and Paul had assumed that Lori was one of the steadies at the studio.

When Paul discovers his mistake he is both pleased and chagrined. He manages to break down her resistance and they have dinner. In the days that follow, his feeling for Lori gives him some understanding of what makes her run. At dinner one night he tries to dissuade her from the business of beauty and to rely more on who she is rather than on what she looks like. Lori becomes impatient with him for the idea of losing the only way of life she has known is beyond her comprehension and they part in an uneasy truce.

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Lori's trust in her beauty seems to have been justified when she is accepted as a candidate for the title of "America's Sweetheart" in a new television show. Each week a group of beautiful young women compete in a series of eliminations. It becomes obvious fairly soon that the producers are little interested in the talent of the various girls or their personality or congeniality. What do they look like in swimsuits and leotards and what dance routines can they display so as to show off their natural attributes. It is the female body on the hoof. The audiences like Lori and their applause restores the confidence that had been seeping out of her these several months. Her beauty is again working. People appreciate her. She calls her aunt in Missouri and the older woman is happy and relieved to hear from her for Lori's silence has worried her. Now Lori announces that she and all their friends can watch the finals of the show. To Lori, it will prove that the loss in the Miss America pageant will be forgotten...and forgiven.

But on the afternoon of the big night, Lori learns the winner

has been decided upon by the producers. It had all been set from the start and the women had just been used. Lori is devastated. Paul tries to find her but she has disappeared.

She has gone to a town in upstate New York. In an angry rebellion against the beauty that has failed her, Lori loses some of the sparkle that had made her so pretty. In the job she takes at a local store, she is quiet..seeking her privacy. Lori has not only dropped out of sight ..she has dropped out of her life as well. It is her landlady who changes things for her when, in cleaning her room, she comes across some clippings of Lori as a beauty queen. She spreads the word quickly and she becomes a celebrity in the small town.

With it comes an offer from a woman who runs a charm school to come and teach the young girls. Lori demurs but in meeting some of the kids, she changes her mind.

A chance to have their children made into beautiful women by a former candidate for Miss America is more than the mothers can resist and ^{on} the first day the charm school finds a full house. As Lori watches the mothers primping the young girls and urging them on, she flashes back to her childhood and the root of her own life. The words she hears are those of the mothers present in the room as the scenes of her

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growing up and the endless contests in which she was attended by her aunt all become painfully, agonizingly clear.

As silence fills the room and she faces her expectant audience, her words rip and excoriate the mothers. All the hurts and pent up anger erupt from Lori and she tells the kids what real love is. It is a scene the town will long remember.

And Lori? She comes back to New York, ready to find her true place. When Paul finds her, he has never known her to quite that beautiful.

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